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Reading is defined operationally as the cognitive process of perceiving and ordering our environment. As such it is a psychomotor process involving the reorganization of experiences evoked by some stimulus. Thus defined, reading is equated with perception and has several primary functions, including concept building, which begins with perception and continues through abstraction and generalization formation. Reading then becomes a means of attaining an ability to meet, understand, and deal with environment. References are included. (MD)

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WHY SHOULD I READ?

by

Donald L. Cleland

The question: "Why Should I Read?" may seem inappropriate to this group --a professional group of educators who have devoted years to organizing reading environments and judiciously manipulating them so that those under their tutelage will have progressed a little further toward maturity in reading skills. To the members of our affluent society--a society that presumably is a reading society when we consider the total product of our printing presses==this same question may also be out of time and place--almost an anachronism. Not only has the adult who has meager linguistic skills pondered this query, but the child who is able to use the tape recorder, the radio and T.V., and other auditory aids to gather information to resolve conflicts or to answer questions, has faced the dilemma: To Read or Not to Read. But on the other side of the coin, who among us has not, on many occasions, selected a book, retreated into a world of his own, and for a period of time, possessed himself with a full measure of quietness?

Thus, all of us have employed the art of reading for many purposes, running the gamut from seeking answers to such mundane questions as: "When does the next bus leave for downtown?" to bibliotherapy--when wishing to harmonize emotions or seeking succor.

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It has been said that the age of miracles is over--they do not happen any more. Yet, is it not a miracle when man has acquired a language facility which enables him to communicate with renowned scholars, the great thinkers, the poets, the dreamers, the revered religious leaders, the dedicated humanists, past and present? Have you not witnessed the sudden change that takes place when a child has found a book that fits and upon reading it has walked with a lighter step, his spirits buoyed to a new level; and for a period of time, all is right? And you, in like manner, at the close of the day when your intense thoughts are encircling you, closing in, making you your own prisoner, have you not turned to the

literature of your choice, and having read, suddenly realized that your unvoiced prayers have been answered?

From among the many purposes of reading, I should like to select one, namely To Better Appraise My Environment, and explore it with you.

On several occasions, I have expressed the following points of view:[1]

> A major responsibility of the citizenry in a democratic society is to appraise the environment in which they live; to decide upon a course of action through logical reasoning; and then to apprise contemporaries of this decision or judgment. Upon this premise--that the communicative process is an essential characteristic of a democracy which demands of its citizens the ability to communicate effectively and with insight and critical analysis--it follows that reading, one of the facets of the total language spectrum, is and will remain, one of its most important and indispensable phases. Through reading, more than any other phase of communication, the responsible citizen can analyze a more varied and clear record of current and past events. Through reading, the perceptive citizen can ascertain the role the individual plays in his own social group, the community in the state, the state in the nation, the nation in world affairs and, during some morrow, the world in interplanetary litigations.

To attempt to convince you of the importance of reading in a democratic society would be akin to carrying coals to Newcastle or Gilding the Lily. Yet, reaffirmation has never dulled a belief or conviction.

"What is reading?" The term is so much with us that its very profusion in the literature and in the conversation of those dedicated to the education of our children may lead some to underestimate its complexity. It could be assumed with reasonable confidence that definitions would run the complete range from the meaningless repetition of a line of print to perfect communication with an author. Some would say that whenever man reacts to or interprets all types of sensory stimulation, he is engaged in the art or skill of reading. Others would say that a person is not reading unless he reacts in a meaningful way to those graphic symbols we call words, and still others would say that the art or mental process of reading existed before language was developed or even before man was able to utter intelligible sounds, as when early man went to the mouth of his cave, observed the heavens, and sensed that inclement weather was imminent. Reading, however, became much more complex when man ultimately assigned squiggles to selected segments of his experience.

Frank G. Jennings, in his book, This is Reading, expresses the same point of view:[2]

> But reading, remember, is not restricted to the printed page. Actually, it never was. In one sense reading is the art of transmitting the ideas, facts, and feelings from the mind and soul of an author to the mind and soul of a reader, with accuracy and understandings, and much more. But

> throughout his history man has "read" many things: the flights of birds, the guts of sheep, sun spots, liver spots and the life lines on a hand. He has read the lore of the jungle, the spoor of the beast, and the portents in a dish of tea. But whatever he has read and however he has read, it has always been for a "reason." It was only when man invented symbols for the words in his mouth and the ideas in his teeming brain that other kinds of reading became useful, possible, or even desirable. Yet even then, as it still is in a large measure today, this kind of reading was essentially magical. It was and is converted to practical use when man realized that words written down could pin down his purposes, hold his plans still, the better to study them. Word magic is one of man's most wonderful and most dangerous tools. It builds air castles, raises an army of dragon men, fixes a star on a name, and sends human blood running through dirty gutters.

Yet, possibly, the same question still looms in your minds! "What is Reading?" Let us search the literature and read (note) what the scholars say:

1. Yoakam, in his book, Basal Reading Instruction, defines reading as a process of interpreting symbols. However, we must infer that symbols, as he uses the term, refers to the graphic symbols we call words.[3]
2. Tinker and McCullough, in their book, Teaching Elementary Reading, define reading as...reading involves the recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimuli for the recall of meanings built up through past experiences, and the construction of new meanings through manipulation of concepts already possessed by the Reader.[4]
3. Dechant, in his book, Improving the Teaching of Reading, does not define the process as definitions are usually given, but describes the skills as: Reading is--a sensory process; a perceptual process; a response; a learned process; a developmental task; an interest; a learning process; and communication.[5]
4. Bond and Tinker in the revised edition of their book, Reading Difficulties--Their Diagnosis and Correction, gives an operational definition: "Reading involves the recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimulus for the recall of meanings built up through the reader's past experiences."[6]

I could quote other definitions of reading; but upon close examination I would find that each would be operational in nature; i.e., the definition would serve as a frame of reference for a treatise on one or more aspects of the act of communication.

At this phase of my presentation, I am compelled to give an operational definition of reading and one which, hopefully, will serve as a matrix for a further discussion of, Why Should I Read?

> Reading is a central mental activity involving the higher intellectual processes in which there is a reorganization of experiences which have been evoked by some stimulus, or a unique sequence of stimuli such as graphic symbols, an object or a series of related objects, an event or a unique series of events, a relationship, etc. Or, to express it more concisely: READING IS THE COGNITIVE PROCESS OF PERCEIVING AND ORDERING OUR ENVIRONMENT. IT IS A PSYCHO-MOTOR PROCESS.

If I could, however, conjure up a definition of reading that would be universally accepted by all scholars, the College Reading Association could not afford my fee.

Specifically, I have said that perceiving and reading are the same act. The perception of an object, event, situation, or a relationship includes the arousal of meaning; and by the same token, reading includes the arousal of meaning. Both are visual, auditory, and psycho-motor processes.

One of the primary functions of reading (perceiving) is to acquire valid, well-organized and concise concepts. These generalizations are the main materials of the thinking process. They are long agrowing and are the end products of many experiences, both direct and vicarious.

The word <u>concept</u> is used rather freely by both professional and lay people. Many use it as a condiment to flavor their writing and speech. Perhaps, and because of its common use, it has lost its significance as the main ingredient of the thinking process.

What are concepts? They have been defined in a variety of ways, but all of them seem to carry a common core. On the one hand, a person might say that concepts are the end product of inductive thinking in which the child abstracts from related experiences that which is relevant to the understanding of an idea previously obtained. They are generalizations based upon previous experiences and perhaps that which a person is experiencing at any given moment. Again, concepts may be defined as the cognitive organizing systems which serve to bring pertinent features of past experiences to bear upon a present stimulus or a unique sequence of stimuli. Concepts, then, are one means whereby present perceptions (percepts) are shaped by past experiences (images and memories). Concepts, therefore, are more or less stabilized percepts.[7] <u>Concepts</u> are built from percepts, images, and memories. Perhaps an operational definition of these terms will serve as a tenable base for further discussion of concepts and a manner in which they are developed.

Percepts may be thought of or defined as what is known of an object, an event, a quality, a situation, or a relationship as a result of sensory experiences. They are more or less time-bound: an awareness of present data, rather than a memory or image of things past. They do not exist in isolation, but tend to be bolstered by other related experiences.

An image is a form of centrally aroused experience, bearing a resemblance in structure to a previous perception. Since it always refers to a past event, it may be incomplete or inaccurate in comparison to the original experience.

Memory is a generic term for experience based upon previous experiences of the organism. Also, it might be said that it is the process of mental representation of at least a recognizable equivalent of the original experience. It may involve approximation of previous experiences, as when a student almost knows the date of VE day, but will date it before or after some other more vividly recalled experience.

Thus, the materials from which concepts are built are percepts, images, and memories. And to reiterate, they are one of the main ingredients of the thinking process and are long agrowing. The clarity, organization, and completeness of our concepts are, perhaps, one of the best indicators of our probable success in the academic world, as well as what we know, what we believe, and largely what we do.

Again, I reiterate the theme of this presentation--"Why I Should Read!" The answer should be evident--so the concepts I build are clear, well-organized, and as complete as current percepts, images, and memories will permit. Thus, I will be able to make the most valid appraisal of my environment--the classroom, the professional organizations to which I belong, the social groups with which I am affiliated, the service organizations in which I hold membership--thus, I should be able, therefore, to contribute significantly to these groups in a manner intended by my maker, and finally, I will have paid, in part at least, my personal debt to the society which begat me.

How are concepts formed? I do not wish to insult your intelligence. You have been helping students build valid concepts as long as you have been in the classroom. Remember the theme of this paper--"Why I Should Read!" In reality, therefore, I am talking to myself and am attempting to build a construct, a model of this complex, cognitive process.

Much like the thinking process or the mental act of comprehending the printed page, we have only shreds of evidence, partial answers to the above posed question. An obstacle blocks my way--I must use words to define words. This poses another question: What is a word? They are so much with us that their very profusion may lead to some invalid assumptions concerning their nature and use. One of these assumptions might be that the word is identical with the object or thing. Anyone who fails to perceive the symbolic relationship between words and

reality is really saying that a description of a man is the man. Another way of stating this is to say that reality is reality and remains reality, regardless of the graphic symbols we use to describe it.

Words have no inherent meaning. There is no catness to the word cat; there is no cornyness to the word corn; and a rose would be just as beautiful and aromatic if called a gup. But you recognize as well as I that the sound gup is too harsh to represent a thing as beautiful as a rose.

It is important for us to remember that words are words, and that things are things; events are events; situations are situations; relationships are relationships; and that words are related to objects, events, situations, relationships as each of us relates them. Words, then, are the visual or oral signals used to represent or symbolize a segment of our experiential background. Thus, the words we use are as individual as each of us are individuals. Not every word is a concept--but concepts (generalized percepts, images, and memories) are represented by words. And, again we might ask: "What is a word?" A word is nothing more than a graphic or linguistic symbol that represents a segment of our experience. Here is a construct, a model, of the intellectual or cognitive processes utilized as concepts are built.

A. Perception--the act of observing or perceiving. I must perceive clearly and with a high degree of veridicality the object, the event, situation, or relationship. Certain percepts, therefore, are garnered as a product of the act of perceiving. As I perceive or observe, certain guidelines would serve me well as I strive for this veridicality. Among these might be the following:
   1. Were the viewpoint and purpose of the observation clearly fixed?
   2. Was the observation casual or deliberate? Was there a briefing?
   3. Was I in the appropriate physical and mental state?
   4. Was I competent to know what had been observed?
   5. Would other observers agree with my appraisal?
   6. Is it possible for others to observe the same phenomena?
   7. Was the observation reported (a record made) soon after it was perceived?
   8. Was the observation firsthand (direct) or secondary (vicarious)?
   9. Were instruments or other devices used? Were they valid and reliable?
   10. Did the percepts gleaned cohere with other related facts?

B. Abstraction--this refers to the mental process by which I would neglect or cut off certain impressions or select percepts, images, or memories which are related. The process of selecting a specific meaning from a

generic meaning may be called abstraction. Again, the following guidelines may be useful:

1. Were only percepts which are related selected?
2. If images have been selected, were they separated from hallucinations?
3. Are the images or memories selected the product of autistic thinking? If so, were they relegated to their proper place?
4. If memories are selected, will they fit into the context of the concept being developed?
5. How far removed is the original experience from the moment of recall?
6. How complete is the recall?

C. Inductive thinking or the formation of the generalization. In this type of reasoning, related data are integrated, and therefore, a generalization (concept) emerges. This is the final step in concept formation. The following might serve as guidelines in assuring the development of clear, concise, and well-organized concepts.

1. Were sufficient percepts, images, or memories abstracted or selected?
2. Were they selected from a variety of situations?
3. Were they truly representative cases?
4. Were conflicting percepts, images, or memories used?
5. If so, was the concept appropriately modified?
6. Were other concepts used? If so, did they add to the clarity of the concept developed?

As stated earlier, concepts are one of the primary materials of the thinking act. My appraisal of the environment in which I live will be no more valid than the clarity, completeness, and the organic quality of the concepts used in the thinking processes employed. It behooves me, therefore, to strive continuously to refine the materials of thinking I use as I appraise the reality which surrounds me, particularly if I am to make significant contributions to the society in which I live.

It would appear appropriate at this instant to look at a hypothetical situation in which a hypothetical child might develop the concept <u>fairness</u>. It is reasonable to assume that the following percepts, images, memories, and related concepts would add to an understanding of the word--<u>fairness</u>.

A. Percepts

1. Observation of Student Council handling minor infractions during change of classes (hall traffic).
2. Observation of town council handling grievances submitted by irate citizens.

3. Observation of a Magistrate handling traffic violations.
4. Observation of umpires as they handle infractions of rules of athletic contests.
5. Percepts gleaned from reading certain sections of biographies of famous men of history--such as Lincoln, Washington, etc.
6. Percepts gleaned from reading material related to Social Science classes.

B. Images
1. Image of giving gifts to the less fortunate at some festive occasion.
2. Imagination influenced as a result of reading a story in which Babe Ruth visits every boy in a hospital ward.
3. Imagination influenced as he observes a T.V. program in which the sheriff metes out justice in a frontier town or community.
4. Imagination influenced by participation in Boy Scout or Sea Scout work--such as helping in the supervision of a playground in which the less fortunate may take advantage of recreational facilities.
5. Image of working with children of other ethnic backgrounds as they enjoy equal opportunities with all races, creeds, and colors.

C. Memory
1. Memory of the adult members of a household treating all children impartially.
2. Memory of attending a Boy Scout Jamboree and his contacts with Scouts of many nations.
3. Memory of school bully on playground--might is right.
4. Memory of father as he settles a quarrel involving brothers and/or sisters.
5. Memory of the School Principal as he handles disciplinary cases.

D. Other Related Concepts
1. Related concepts such as justice, equity, integrity, dueness, etc. also contribute to the clarity, preciseness, and organization of the concept--<u>fairness</u>.

It should be evident that maturity in social behavior is determined, in a large measure, by the concepts a person has acquired. If a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, in like measure, the clarity, conciseness, and organization of a concept is no more valid than the validity of its ingredients--percepts, images, memories and related concepts. If you recall nothing else of this presentation, I hope that you will remember: <u>Concepts are long agrowing</u>.

Again, I should like to return to my definition of reading: READING TO ME IS THE COGNITIVE ART OF PERCEIVING AND ORDERING MY ENVIRONMENT. In the formation of the concept, fairness, the hypothetical child was reading, not only the materials encompassing social studies, biographies, sport stories, etc., but he was reading, if you please, events, situations, and relationships.

And, parenthetically speaking, do we as teachers include in the learning environment we organize for our students sufficient opportunity for our students to raad events, situations, relationships, as a readiness step to the reading of a printed text of similar subjects?

Have not our great poets been able to read situations, events, relationships' As a case in point, I should like to read "Unexpected Snowfall," by Lilianne Grant Rich.

I slept--
Each tranquil bush and bough and twig without
Was bare and black and brittle, and the sky
Was moonless, starless, voiceless,--still as death--
Quiet as a thought in its intensity.

I woke--
And still the velvet darkness cradled me,
Yet every nerve within me sensed a change.
The air felt thin and new and all unbreathed.
The vast night quivered taut, expectant, strange.

I rose--
What exquisite transformation met my eyes!
Each bush and twig was clothed and softly white,
The land, now lucent swansdown, swept to greet
Fair glistening mountains, virginal, dawn-bright.

I marveled--
Yet anew, at the consummate skill
Of the Supreme Artist, Infinite and Wise,
Whose wondrous hand in one brief night can make
This silent miracle of snow--this Paradise.

Or, another case in point, did not the Psalmist, as I am sure many of you have done, lie on a high hill and read the stars at night; and did he not stand on the same hill during a day and view the land below as a prelude to describing his concept of God:

The heavens declare the Glory of God;
And the firmament showeth his handiwork;
Day unto day uttereth speech;
And night unto night showeth knowledge.

And as a parting thought: The development of a thoughtful,iinquiring mind has been listed by more than a few scholars as one of the objectives of education in a democracy. Since concepts are the primary materials of the thinking act,

this very fact emphasizes the truth of the old adage--"As a man thinketh, so is he." Could we not, those of us who are dedicated to the development of a language facility commensurate with each child's unique abilities, solve many of the social problems of this moment by refining and literally cleaning up the language behaviors of certain aberrant social groups?

I should hope so.

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